

# *Mahatma Basaveshwara*



**LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT**  
NEW DELHI  
APRIL 2003

***MAHATMA  
BASAVESHWARA***

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## PREFACE

Mahatma Basaveshwara occupies a prominent place among the great men of India. He lived his life for the well-being of his fellow-beings. A mystic saint, poet-philosopher, religious leader and social reformer, Basaveshwara belonged to that inspired band which enriched our culture and civilisation. He inculcated the spirit of service and restored the faith in God. He preached the message of universal love and brotherhood, right conduct and devotion to God and propagated the doctrine of social equality. His greatest achievement was to knit a large community into an integrated whole, irrespective of caste or class. The impact he made on the life of our country, particularly in Karnataka, is unparalleled.

Basaveshwara was a rationalist who spoke out against meaningless practices and traditions. For him, compassion was the very foundation of religion. By his preachings as well as his actions, he showed that the good of the society and the salvation of man lay in the practice of compassion.

A grateful nation honours the memory of Basaveshwara on 28 April 2003 when the Hon'ble President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam unveils his statue in Parliament House. To mark the occasion, the Lok Sabha Secretariat is bringing out this booklet containing the profile of Basaveshwara and some select photographs.

We are deeply grateful to the Hon'ble Speaker, Shri Manohar Joshi for his inspiring guidance in organising this function. The statue, sculpted by the eminent sculptor, Shri Sham Sarang has been donated by Dr. Sharanabasawappa Appa, Mahadasoha Peethadhipati Poojya Sharanabasaveshwar Sansthan, Gulbarga. We are grateful to him for donating the statue.

This publication is a humble tribute to the memory of Mahatma Basaveshwara. We hope that it will be found useful and informative by all.

NEW DELHI;  
28 April, 2003

G.C. MALHOTRA,  
*Secretary-General,*  
*Lok Sabha.*



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# **BASAVESHWARA**

**- A Profile**

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Basaveshwara, also known as Basava, is one of the greatest spiritual leaders of India. A revolutionary saint, a great poet in Kannada, a well-known mystic and an ardent social reformer, he is hailed as the prophet of a new era in Karnataka. Basaveshwara was born in a highly placed family in Ingaleswara-Bagewadi (now in Bijapur District of Karnataka) around the year A.D. 1131. Even as a child, he displayed signs of greatness and individuality. He was a precocious child with an independent spirit. Born at a time when society was riven by political upheavels, social schisms and religious animosities, he restored the faith of masses in God and inculcated the spirit of service in them. He sponsored *Virashaivism* which brought about many changes in the cultural life of India and conceived of a casteless society. It gave freedom of thought and action and a free scope for discussion in religious matters.

Basava stands out as one of the most outstanding personalities in the religious history of our country. He was a colossus who dominated the scene across the centuries and was a source of inspiration to millions of people in South India for nearly eight hundred years and moulded their lives.

He envisaged a society in which every human being was expected to work and enunciated his principle through his philosophy of *Kayaka* according to which a person who does not work is not entitled to his bread. Thus it gave a great fillip to the development of arts and crafts of the land. It liberated the people from the shackles of groundless fears and irrational superstitions. It did away with caste distinctions and priest-craft and tried to uplift and educate the deprived and the downtrodden. It gave sanctity to the family relations and the status of women. It gave a literature of considerable value and enriched the Kannada language. It brought about a synthesis between head, heart and hand, between Jnana, Bhakti, and Karma not by enunciating the abstract principles but by establishing it in the concrete person.

Basava had a new vision of faith through a surrender to a nobler conception of God. He preached a zealous devotion to lord Shiva and strict devotion to the linga as a symbol of discipleship. His teachings offered what appeared to people as new understanding

the millions of Veer Saivites both in Karnataka (known as lingayats) and in other parts of India.

Himself an embodiment of great human virtues, Basava was a man of vision. It was his firm conviction that no sacrifice was too great to eradicate casteism, selfishness and hypocrisy which characterized the Indian society during his days. Like various religious leaders, he was profoundly influenced by the contemporary religious, social and political trends and was convinced about the supreme need of unity of all people in the country irrespective of the narrow considerations of caste, creed, etc. No wonder, his lofty teachings and inspiring leadership had a great impact in South India for many centuries.

### **Basava as a Minister**

Basava was Minister in King Bijjala's Court and was a man of the masses. As he had established a close rapport with the people, he was called elder brother Basava or Basavana in popular usage. Basava's concept of society was basically democratic and the democratic approach was ingrained in his thought and action. Basava strongly felt that democracy was based on the highest moral principle and that the genuine wishes and aspirations of the people must be fulfilled. No administration can survive for long if it is not responsive. The progress and strength of an empire or nation can be and should be judged by the moral and ethical values of its people and not by the power and pomp of the palace. It is because of this conviction that Basava did not hesitate to tender his resignation when he found that King Bijjala was not prepared to eliminate social inequalities and establish a society based on democratic principles. Basava did not aspire for any name or fame, power and position but looked upon his high position as an opportunity to serve the common man. His greatest desire was to be of service to the common man. This is how he put it in his *vachana*.

I do not desire for the status of Brahma,  
Nor do I hanker after the position of Vishnu.  
Neither do I aspire for the rank of Rudra.  
Oh! Lord Kudala Sangama Deva bless me with.  
The Status of knowing and saving thy devotees.

The moral Government enunciated by Aristotle finds a parallel in the religious parliament called *Anubhava Mantapa*. Basava shaped a social democratic State. Basava, though a minister to the King, was not afraid of him. We find him saying, "May I fear that Bijjala as I fear you, O Lord Kudala Sangama Deva?" It is the revolutionary and democratic teachings of Basava which began to create some fear in the mind of Bijjala, the autocratic ruler. It is against this background that the rift between Basava and King Bijjala should be seen. In political terminology, it was a struggle between monarchy and democracy.

## **Basava as a Saviour of the Downtrodden**

The religion which Basava preached was essentially a social religion. He was primarily a social rebel and a revolutionary. He not only helped to remove superstitions and ignorance, but also sought to restore the Hindu philosophy to its pristine glory.

Basava was a revolutionary thinker who believed in a just, egalitarian and rational society, where men of all castes, religions and occupations had equality and dignity. His devotion to God and compassion for all human beings was boundless. He was disgusted to see hundreds of castes, sub-castes and the degrading wrangles among them. He conceded only two classes among human beings, Bhakta and Bhavis *i.e.* the good and the bad. He illustrated his affirmation with a score of examples of sages and seers and showed that caste by birth could never be the criterion for the worth of a man. He was contemptuous of obscurantist ideas, rituals and customs. He did not believe in tall talk and hair splitting speculation. He did not say anything which he could not put into practice. He was sad at the degeneration of religion. The existence of hundreds of castes and creeds, besides the four-fold divisions, each claiming superiority over the other was a perversion of the Upanishadic philosophy which proclaimed the essential oneness of all humanity. Again, there was the abominable practice of untouchability which Basava considered a disgrace to man and a blot on society. He strongly condemned the selfish practices and exploitation that were prevalent in the guise of four-fold divisions of the society. He rationally illumined the true nature of religion.

The following *vachana* is a shining example of his humanism and rationality:

The man who slays is a pariah  
The man who eats the carrion is a low-caste person  
Where is the caste here-where?  
Our Kudala Sanga's Sharana  
Who loves all living things  
He is the well born one.

Thus he declares that man's worth should be judged not by his caste but by his thoughts and deeds and by his conduct and character.

Basava was deeply moved by the degeneration of society and stressed that only a religion that could bring about the integration of thought and action could save mankind. He humbly believed that happiness here and hereafter could come by through the practice of *Sarana Dharama*, with its profound social orientation. A society can move forward only if the moral level of the society is high. Basava spoke constantly of the necessity of each individual adhering to the path of the good and struggled against the corrosive selfishness and brought about a regeneration of the people. The selfish know not the interests of others; he said and declared, righteousness here is righteousness hereafter. It is through proper behaviour and good actions that the purity of man's mind and body is preserved. Society is a collection of individuals and an ideal society is a society of good men. He taught:

These commandments  
engrave in thy heart—  
Thou shalt not steal  
nor kill  
Let no falsehood foul thy tongue;  
nor anger burn thy brow.  
Bear with one another,  
and suffer all men.  
Stand not high in thy own esteem.  
So shall thy ways

both of heart and demeanour  
proclaim thy purity;  
and shall favour find  
Of Lord Kudala Sangama.

There are no limits to man's desire. It always exceeds his own intention and knows no satiety. It is desire which leads to re-birth and which is the source of all calamities. Thwarted desire results in anger and from anger flow all evil things. Shri Basaveshwara, therefore, taught men to believe that the best way was to give up desire. People who live in society endanger its well being when they, like the ancient Ravana, hanker after others' goods and others' women.

Basaveshwara condemned all forms of violence to life and held the eating of flesh to be a most sinful act. He preached kindness to all living creatures and said that no religion would be worth the name without it.

What sort of religion can it be  
Without compassion?  
Compassion needs must be  
Towards all living things;  
Compassion is the root  
Of all religious faith:  
Lord Kudala Sangama Deva does not care  
For what is not like this

Basaveshwara upheld Truth and rejected Untruth. Truth was God for him:

Behold! Between the words  
Of mortals and of gods  
There is no difference!  
To speak the truth is world of gods;  
To speak untruth, the mortal world.  
Good works is Heaven,  
Bad works is Hell—  
And you can witness it,  
O Lord Kudala Sangama Deva

Basaveshwara impressed upon the people the value of the great teaching of the Upanishads—'Speak Truth and act righteously'. The *Sarana Dharma* which he preached is firmly founded on righteousness in word and deed and has the dimensions of a universal religion.

## **Basava as an Emancipator of Women**

It is an undeniable fact that the position of women in any society signifies the level of culture of that society. The condition of women in the twelfth century in which Basava was born was pathetic. Among the manifold contributions towards the rejuvenation of the contemporary tradition-ridden society was his recognition of women's individuality and their rights. The emancipation of women with Basava was not merely a social reform but an article of faith. It was Basava who liberated women from the traditional fetters and gave them a honourable existence. He was the driving force behind the founding of *Anubhava Mantapa*, the forum for religious discussions and experiences. The *Anubhava Mantapa* had many women as its members. By introducing the ceremony of '*Linga Diksha*', *Virashaivism* threw open its door to men and women alike, of all castes and creeds. Women were regarded as in no way inferior to men in spiritual matters. The contributions in religious experience from women were highly appreciated and encouraged.

There are several *vachanas* where Basava makes reference to how woman is to be looked upon. The main point which Basava drives home to his followers is that to look upon a woman not otherwise as sister or mother is a sin. Thus, he lays down a code of conduct for his followers.

## **Basava and Democracy**

Basava was a free thinker and denounced the Varnasrama-Dharma in a number of ways. Under his inspiring leadership, hundred of saints took part in the movement which was democratic in spirit and form. The spirit of the Lingayat movement was democratic in the sense that people of all castes and calling had



a role in the shaping of society and religion. The discussions and discourses, the dialogues and debates were conducted in the religious academy called *Anubhava Mantapa* of Kalyana. Women saints took active part in the discussions and dialogues at the religious academy.

The Virashaiva movement was based on the uplift and equality of the masses by abolishing the class system from society based on Varnasrama. Basava fought for the rights of the common man. Unlike Plato, Basava did not divide society into the classes of intellectuals and the mass of manual workers. Basava's *Anubhava Mantapa* was composed of scholars and philosophers hailing from the rank and file of the populace.

Basava envisaged a religion and a social order in which there would be no barriers of caste or creed, no distinction between the rich and the poor. Thus we find that the teachings of Basava are imbued with democratic ideals.

### **Basava's Spiritualism**

Before the birth of Basava, Indian society was a victim of lifeless traditions. Plunged in deep darkness, it was unable to shape its own future. The degeneration of society moved him and he felt that only a religion that could bring about the integration of thought and action could save mankind. Basava boldly declared that happiness could come only through the practice of *Sarava Dharma* with its profound social orientation.

The reasons why Basava chose the path of mysticism and spiritualism were unique. He found religious-minded men of his times advocating dogmas and traditions for the realisation of God. The society was hopelessly divided into castes and communities. The path of knowledge and the 'path of action' taught by early Indian scriptures for winning the grace of God were difficult ones for the ordinary man to tread. To him, the proper method of attaining divine knowledge was to cultivate the condition of mind in which the unity of soul and God was immediately felt. He, therefore, rebelled against the traditional modes of religious practices and tried his best to organise a religious society which

could experience the pleasures of divine bliss unhindered by other useless considerations. In short, he came to the conclusion that the practice of intense devotion to Siva, the Supreme God, was the surest and indeed the only way of establishing that Godhead. Basava deepened Hinduism on its religious side and made the path of devotion highly popular. He was not only an unequalled devotee of Siva but also a staunch advocate of the path of devotion.

## **Basava's Perspective on Dignity of Labour**

The concept of *Kayaka* represents a remarkable contribution of Basava to practical philosophy. In its wider sense as preached and practised by Basava and a host of other sarnas, it means an occupation, a profession, a vocation, labour, work, duty or any employment undertaken as means of self-realisation. *Kayaka* enjoins that everyone must do one's duty. Bodily or manual labour is inevitable in some form or other. The underlying principle of *Kayaka* is that man should not live an ideal life but be an earning member of the society. It is opposed to the idea of meditation in a forest, renunciation, beggary and dependence on others for a living. *Kayaka* cuts at the root of the traditional varna or caste order of society. It is a new outlook towards man and his labour and towards life and divinity. It embodies the principles of dignity of man and dignity of labour. *Kayaka* is a spiritual view of labour and not merely a materialistic one. According to *Kayaka*, man has to sublimate his physical labour into a spiritual pursuit. The mercenary motive is sublimated into spiritual motive. Carlye says "Work is Worship" and a Sarana says "Work is Heaven". The Kannada saying is "Kayakave Kailasa". Every labour is looked upon by Sarana with high honour, dignity and spiritual significance. *Kayaka* discourages amassing wealth or hoarding money. *Kayaka* is a duty by which each one has to maintain oneself, and render its proceeds to the welfare of the society as a whole. The *Kayaka* view of life is in conformity with the modern democratic principles of equality, justice, liberty and fraternity which are laid down in the Preamble to the Constitution of India.

The democratic principle of freedom of occupation is embodied in *Kayaka*. Basava revolted against the hereditary caste system and advocated freedom of occupation and dignity of labour.

The message of *Kayaka* emancipated people from age-long social and religious superstitions and restored them to self-reliance, self-confidence and spirit of freedom and free thinking.

### **His *Vachanas***

In the history of Karnataka, with the appearance of Basava in the 12th century, a new cultural and moral renaissance took place. A new form of literature called *vachanas* was invented as means of expression. *Vachanas* had colloquial medium using the language of the masses. His *vachanas* or sayings were characterised by simplicity and yet they embodied profound truths of the order of Upanisadic teaching. He presented to us the essence of religion, which in other words, is the quest of the human soul for the highest elevation. Never before was the spoken Kannada used in literature. It is Basava who cultivated and switched this literary form and raised it to the height of universal literature and caused revolution in the Kannada literature both in form and in content. It was because of him that *Virashaiva* saints created a literature which was characterised by an honest and deep self explanation.

Basava had a remarkable power of communicating his thoughts directly to the hearts of the masses. His *vachanas* show how progressive and farsighted a spiritual leader he was. The figures and images, the similies and metaphors, imageries and word pictures, illustrations and examples, proverbial utterances, countless excerpts from the language of the masses—all these are living witnesses not only to his vast experience and human compassion, but also to his artistic achievements.

He succeeded in eliminating the artificial distance that had grown between the literary language of old Kannada poetry and the spoken language of the common man. He enshrined his rich experience, deep insight and lofty spiritual realisation in a very simple yet profoundly moving language.

Basava, the man with his characteristic way of speaking, his devotion, his sense of dedication, his powerful language, his transparent nature and his inner peace is fully reflected in his *vachanas*. His preachings and practices, his conduct and thought,

his keenness of insight, the intensity of his emotions are his gifts to us through his *vachanas*. The vigour and verve, the strength and fibre, the unique pattern, the ease and naturalness, the elegance of the spoken Kannada language, burst through his *vachanas*, even though he might not have consciously planned to do so. Basava's spiritual practice, his struggle to pursue it against all odds and his humility are fully represented in his *vachanas*.

## Basava's Message

It is an indisputable fact that Basava was a great mystic, a remarkable social reformer and an eminent literary figure. He revolted against superfluous and irrational rituals and ceremonies and the evil of casteism and made people realise that the essence of religion is more important than its shell. It was his firm belief that the caste system stood in the way of the unity and solidarity of the masses. The caste system was not only oppressive but also denied women an honoured place in society. He, therefore, strove to eliminate this evil and put the society on a more equitable basis, on the basis of love and humanity. He preached that every person, whether high or low and rich or poor must work and earn his or her own livelihood.

Basava envisaged a self-sufficient society with no discrimination of caste, creed or sex. Nor was there any distinction of rich and poor. He identified himself with the poor, the degraded and the lowly and underscored the need of voluntary labour.

The concept of *Kayaka* which was expounded by Basava cuts at the root of traditional caste hierarchy; embodying in itself the principles of the dignity and equality of the human beings as also the dignity of labour. It is in conformity with democratic principles and its objective is equitable distribution of work and also wealth. The concept of *Kayaka* liberated people from the shackles of deeply-entrenched social and religious superstitions and awakened people to the spirit of self-reliance, self-confidence and free thinking.

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# **BASAVESHWARA**

**- A Pictorial Profile**

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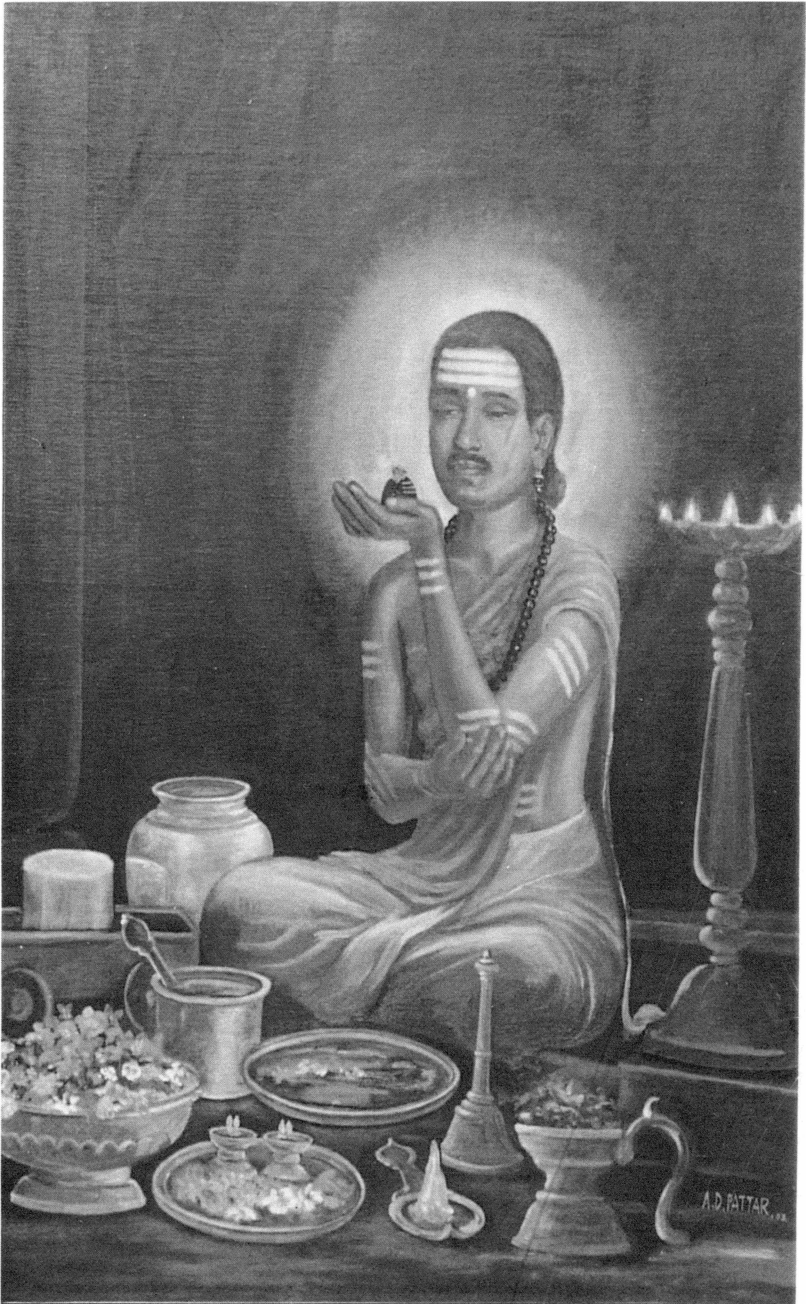
Mahatma Basaveshwara



Basava's initiation ceremony while accepting the Veerashaiva Religion



Basava as the Prime Minister in the Kingdom of Bijjala  
reading the manuscripts



Basava in penance of Ishtalinga (God) for Shivasakshatkara

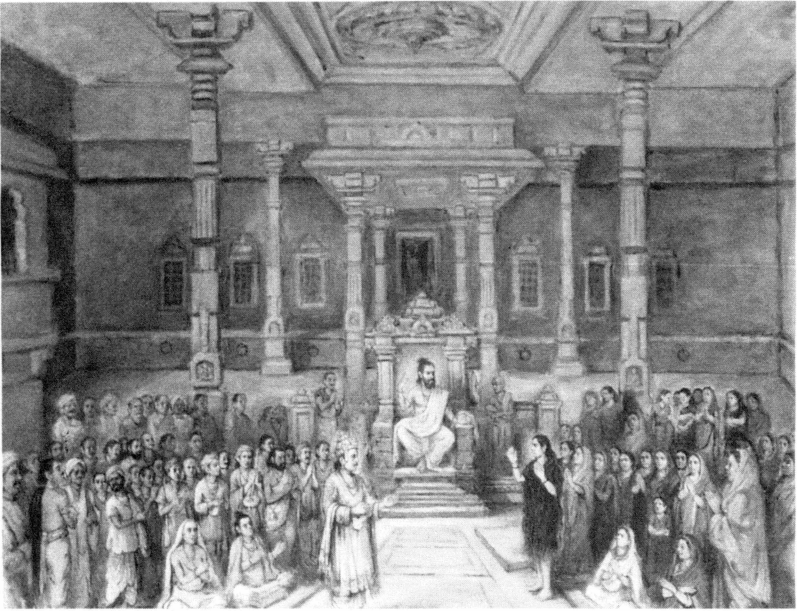




Divine grace in the face of Basaveshwara after prayer



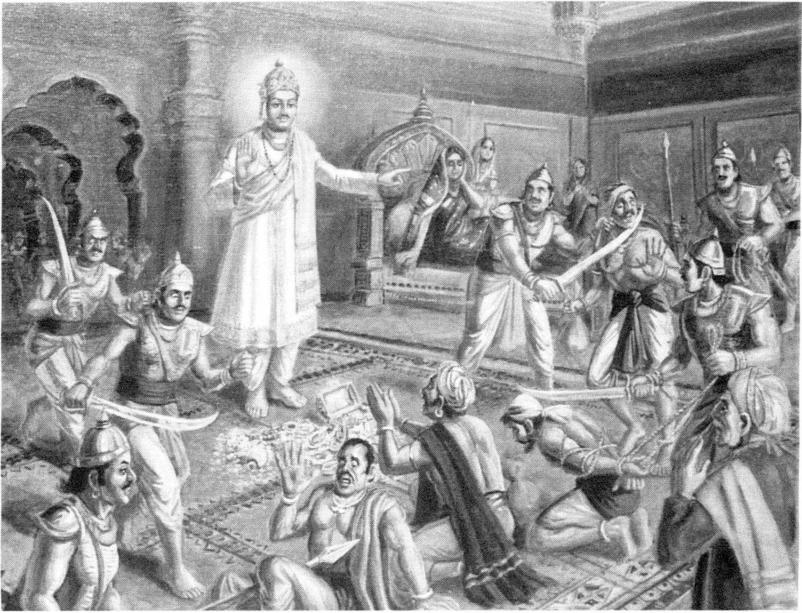
Basaveshwara in the service of the suffering millions



Anubhava Mantapa, a system of spiritual parliament started by Basaveshwara with its emphasis on freedom and equal rights to both men and women



Basaveshwara championing non-violence



Basava ordering the release of a thief as he considered him to be his guest, *Athithi Devobhava*. Basava's spiritual power made the thief to surrender to him



Basaveshwara promoting inter-caste marriage



Basaveshwara





Basaveshwara